

New 'birth certificate' for CIA?

The Central Intelligence Agency has come a long way since revelations about mail openings, dart guns, LSD tests, assassination attempts and other abuses. It has seen new promises of ethical operations, a new director, reorganization, a housecleaning.

But the CIA's congressional overseers have traveled far, too.

For instance, Senate CIA-watchers proposed a new U.S. intelligence charter last week that seems to recognize the need for close surveillance of some spy functions and the need for outright bans on others.

Under the charter terms (reached in close co-operation with the Carter administration), assassinations would be prohibited, as would U.S. participation in the overthrow of any other democratically elected government.

Significantly, the proposed charter would also drastically limit the paid use of U.S. journalists in spy activities. Still, some observers question whether the curbs go far enough; some "voluntary," unpaid contact might indeed circumvent the spirit of the law.

Senate intelligence committee sources say that section of the draft is likely to receive close attention in upcoming debate. That's good news. There must be fewer loopholes than those left in CIA Director Stansfield Turner's recent restatement of agency principles on the use of U.S. journalists.

Similar close attention should be given to provisions allowing the attorney general to determine when agencies can resort to usually illegal means of intelligence-gathering.

Whatever the final shape of the rules, however, Senate intelligence-oversight experts appear ready to put the CIA and other agencies on notice not just with a charter, but with the way the charter will be enforced.

In the past, for example, the CIA charter has prohibited the agency from operating within the United States. Nonetheless, the agency repeatedly violated that ban, as careful congressional investigations found. Now members of the oversight panel seem to be taking pains against future such abuses.

It's vital that those errors never occur again, unless the agencies are to consider their charters a literal license to kill.

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